SŪRAH 42

Al-Shūrā

(Consultation)

Prologue

Like all the *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah, this *sūrah* deals with the issue of faith, but it especially focuses on the question of revelation and the Divine message. It can truly be said that this question provides the central theme of the *sūrah* and that all points discussed in it serve this purpose.

Yet the *sūrah* also expands on the truth of God's oneness, presenting it from different angles. It also speaks of the truth of resurrection and the need to believe in it. The life to come is mentioned in several places with different images of it presented. The *sūrah* also outlines some of the believers' qualities and the good manners characterizing their behaviour. It also mentions man's provisions and how they are given in plenty or in scant measure. Furthermore, it speaks about man and his two states when he enjoys happiness or suffers hardship.

Nevertheless, the question of revelation and the Divine message provides the basic truth the *sūrah* expounds upon, giving it its general ambiance. It is as if all the points and ideas discussed in the *sūrah* are meant to emphasize this truth and drive it home.

The line the *sūrah* takes in presenting this truth and its associated topics requires further discussion. It is presented in different ways, each separated from the other with a few verses that speak about God's

oneness through showing that the Creator, or the Provider, or who controls hearts, or determines all creatures' fates is the One God. As the *sūrah* tackles its main theme of revelation and message, it emphasizes that the source of all revelation is one, as also are the message, the faith, the code of living and the line to be followed. Similarly, the leadership of humanity under the banner of faith is one. Thus the theme of oneness, with all its meanings and connotations, is brought into sharp relief throughout the *sūrah*, whatever topic it may be discussing. We will now briefly refer to some such examples:

The *sūrah* begins with five separate letters: "*Ḥā. Mīm. 'Ayn. Sīn. Qāf.*" These are immediately followed by the statement: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) It, thus, begins by stating that all revelations, throughout all generations, come from the same source. Further attributes of God are added in the next verse: "*His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 4) These attributes highlight the fact that the heavens and the earth belong to one owner, and that He is the Supreme One.

The *sūrah* then takes another line, describing how the universe stands with regard to the question of belief in the One Owner, and to the deviation leading some people to associate partners with Him: "*The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them.*" (Verses 5–6) We thus see the whole universe preoccupied with the question of faith and unbelief to the extent that the heavens are about to be rent asunder because of the deviation by some earth dwellers. For their part, the angels pray for the forgiveness of all those on earth specifically because of the grave offence perpetrated by some of them.

The *sūrah* then returns to its main theme: "*So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall*

be in paradise and some in the blazing fire." (Verse 7) It moves on with the two groups and their different abodes to state that God could have made them all one community. However, His will has decreed on the basis of His knowledge and wisdom that some are admitted to His grace, "*whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) It further states that God is the Protector of all, and that "*He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things.*" (Verse 9)

Again the *sūrah* returns to the central theme of the truth of revelation and message, stating that judgement on all matters that are subject to dispute between people belongs to God who has revealed the Qur'ān to which people must refer in all situations: "*Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn.*" (Verse 10) It then proceeds from God's Lordship to His being the One Creator who alone administers everything in the universe, determines provisions and knows all: "*He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verses 11–12)

Having made these points, the *sūrah* immediately returns to its central theme: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been*

commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high…" (Verses 13–15)

The *sūrah* follows this pattern in presenting the truth of revelation and message, maintaining this ambiance while turning to address other issues of faith which, in turn, endorse that truth. This pattern is abundantly clear in the first part of the *sūrah*, up to and including verse 24, in which the theme of revelation and message is encountered time after time.

The second part, taking up the rest of the *sūrah*, begins with a discussion of God's signs that are seen in the way He gives some people abundant provision while others receive small measure, how He sends rainfall, the creation of the heavens and the earth with all creatures therein, and ships that traverse the sea. It then moves on to outline the basic quality that distinguishes believers and their community. This is followed by an image of the Day of Judgement showing the wrongdoers as they face their punishment: "*you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance.*" (Verses 44–45) By contrast, the believers will be in a dignified position, stating the fate that the wrongdoers face: "*The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering.*" (Verse 45) Against this backdrop, the *sūrah* calls on people to spare themselves such an end before it is too late: "*Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins.*" (Verse 47) Then the *sūrah* reverts to its central theme, the truth of revelation and message, highlighting one of its many aspects: "*If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you].*" (Verse 48)

The *sūrah* continues to refer to its central theme, directly and indirectly, up to its end and moves after each reference to address other ideas relating to it. Its conclusion provides the following statement regarding revelation and message: "*Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our*

servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return." (Verses 52–53)

One of the clear objectives of the *sūrah* emerges from the way it tackles its central theme and how it proceeds, time after time, to refer to related issues. This objective is nothing less than to appoint a new leadership for the advocates of Divine faith. This new leadership is in fact this final message, the messenger delivering it and the Muslim community that follows the straight course defined by God. The first reference to this objective is made at the outset: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) It thus makes it clear that it is God who reveals all messages to all messengers. This final message is a clear progression of something that has long been established.

The second reference follows shortly after that to establish the centre of the new leadership to which reference will be later made: "*So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it.*" (Verse 7) The third reference states the unity of the message whereas the first reference identified the unity of its source: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.*" (Verse 13) In this third reference, the *sūrah* clearly states that division occurred because people disobeyed God's injunction. This did not come about as a result of any ignorance on the part of the followers of those noble messengers; they had the knowledge to spare them such division. It simply occurred as a result of injustice and envy: "*They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them.*" (Verse 14) The *sūrah* then moves on to describe the conditions of those who came after the generations that differed: "*As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14)

At this point it becomes abundantly clear that humanity had sunk into a state of confusion and doubt. It no longer had a wise leadership following a well-defined code. The Divine message that assumes the

leadership of humanity suffered from the division that took place between its followers, while succeeding generations viewed it with profound suspicion, thereby precluding the emergence of wise leadership. The *sūrah* therefore declares that this final message and the messenger delivering it are to assume the role of leadership: "*Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord.*" (Verse 15) Thus the detailed description of the Muslim community, which occurs in the second part of the *sūrah*, comes as a natural progression, because it is this community that will assume the leadership of humanity.

I

A Message Revealed by God

Al-Shūrā (Consultation)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

ʿAyn. Sīn. Qāf. (2)

عٓسٓقٓ ﴿٢﴾

Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you. (3)

كَذَٰلِكَ يُوحِيٓ إِلَيْكَ وَإِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكَ
ٱللَّهُ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣﴾

His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One. (4)

لَهُۥ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ
ٱلْعَلِىُّ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٤﴾

The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory

تَكَادُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتُ يَتَفَطَّرْنَ مِن
فَوْقِهِنَّ ۚ وَٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ يُسَبِّحُونَ

and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (5)

بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِمَن
فِي الْأَرْضِ ۗ أَلَا إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ
الرَّحِيمُ ﴿٥﴾

As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them. (6)

وَالَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِن دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ
اللَّهُ حَفِيظٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَمَا أَنتَ عَلَيْهِم
بِوَكِيلٍ ﴿٦﴾

So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire. (7)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا
لِّتُنذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَىٰ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا
وَتُنذِرَ يَوْمَ الْجَمْعِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ ۚ فَرِيقٌ
فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَفَرِيقٌ فِي السَّعِيرِ ﴿٧﴾

Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. (8)

وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَهُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَٰكِن
يُدْخِلُ مَن يَشَاءُ فِي رَحْمَتِهِ ۚ وَالظَّالِمُونَ
مَا لَهُم مِّن وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿٨﴾

Have they chosen protectors other than Him? God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things. (9)

أَمِ اتَّخَذُوا مِن دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ ۖ فَاللَّهُ هُوَ
الْوَلِيُّ وَهُوَ يُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ
شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٩﴾

وَمَا اخْتَلَفْتُمْ فِيهِ مِن شَيْءٍ فَحُكْمُهُ
إِلَى اللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ اللَّهُ رَبِّي عَلَيْهِ
تَوَكَّلْتُ وَإِلَيْهِ أُنِيبُ ﴿١٠﴾

Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn. (10)

فَاطِرُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ جَعَلَ لَكُم
مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَمِنَ الْأَنْعَامِ
أَزْوَاجًا ۖ يَذْرَؤُكُمْ فِيهِ ۚ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ
شَيْءٌ ۖ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ ﴿١١﴾

He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. (11)

لَهُ مَقَالِيدُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۖ
يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَاءُ وَيَقْدِرُ ۚ
إِنَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything. (12)

شَرَعَ لَكُم مِّنَ الدِّينِ مَا وَصَّىٰ بِهِ نُوحًا
وَالَّذِي أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ وَمَا وَصَّيْنَا بِهِ
إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ ۖ أَنْ أَقِيمُوا الدِّينَ
وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا فِيهِ ۚ كَبُرَ عَلَى الْمُشْرِكِينَ
مَا تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَيْهِ ۚ اللَّهُ يَجْتَبِي إِلَيْهِ مَن
يَشَاءُ وَيَهْدِي إِلَيْهِ مَن يُنِيبُ ﴿١٣﴾

In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. (13)

وَمَا تَفَرَّقُوٓا۟ إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْعِلْمُ
بَغْيًۢا بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِن
رَّبِّكَ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى لَّقُضِىَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ
وَإِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ أُورِثُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِنۢ
بَعْدِهِمْ لَفِى شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ مُرِيبٍ ﴿١٤﴾

They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. (14)

فَلِذَٰلِكَ فَٱدْعُ ۖ وَٱسْتَقِمْ كَمَآ
أُمِرْتَ ۖ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَآءَهُمْ ۖ وَقُلْ ءَامَنتُ
بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ مِن كِتَٰبٍ ۖ وَأُمِرْتُ
لِأَعْدِلَ بَيْنَكُمُ ۖ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّنَا وَرَبُّكُمْ ۖ لَنَآ
أَعْمَٰلُنَا وَلَكُمْ أَعْمَٰلُكُمْ ۖ لَا حُجَّةَ
بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمُ ۖ ٱللَّهُ يَجْمَعُ بَيْنَنَا ۖ وَإِلَيْهِ
ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٥﴾

Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.' (15)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُحَآجُّونَ فِى ٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ
مَا ٱسْتُجِيبَ لَهُۥ حُجَّتُهُمْ دَاحِضَةٌ
عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ ۖ وَعَلَيْهِمْ غَضَبٌ وَلَهُمْ
عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ﴿١٦﴾

As for those who argue about God after He has been acknowledged, their argument is null and void in their Lord's sight: anger will fall upon them and severe suffering awaits them. (16)

اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَنزَلَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ
وَالْمِيزَانَ ۗ وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّ
السَّاعَةَ قَرِيبٌ ﴿١٧﴾

It is God who has bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, and established the balance. For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near. (17)

يَسْتَعْجِلُ بِهَا الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ
بِهَا ۖ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مُشْفِقُونَ
مِنْهَا وَيَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهَا الْحَقُّ ۗ أَلَا إِنَّ
الَّذِينَ يُمَارُونَ فِي السَّاعَةِ لَفِي
ضَلَالٍ بَعِيدٍ ﴿١٨﴾

Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth. Those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray. (18)

اللَّهُ لَطِيفٌ بِعِبَادِهِ يَرْزُقُ مَن يَشَاءُ ۖ
وَهُوَ الْقَوِيُّ الْعَزِيزُ ﴿١٩﴾

God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty. (19)

مَن كَانَ يُرِيدُ حَرْثَ الْآخِرَةِ نَزِدْ
لَهُ فِي حَرْثِهِ ۖ وَمَن كَانَ يُرِيدُ حَرْثَ
الدُّنْيَا نُؤْتِهِ مِنْهَا وَمَا لَهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ
مِن نَّصِيبٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come. (20)

أَمْ لَهُمْ شُرَكَاءُ شَرَعُوا لَهُم مِّنَ
الدِّينِ مَا لَمْ يَأْذَن بِهِ اللَّهُ ۚ وَلَوْلَا
كَلِمَةُ الْفَصْلِ لَقُضِيَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۗ وَإِنَّ
الظَّالِمِينَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢١﴾

Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned? Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them. Painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers. (21)

تَرَى ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ مُشْفِقِينَ
مِمَّا كَسَبُوا۟ وَهُوَ وَاقِعٌۢ
بِهِمْ ۗ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ فِى رَوْضَاتِ
ٱلْجَنَّٰتِ ۖ لَهُم مَّا يَشَآءُونَ
عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَضْلُ
ٱلْكَبِيرُ ﴿٢٢﴾

You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them. And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. (22)

ذَٰلِكَ ٱلَّذِى يُبَشِّرُ ٱللَّهُ عِبَادَهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟
وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ ۗ قُل لَّآ أَسْـَٔلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ
أَجْرًا إِلَّا ٱلْمَوَدَّةَ فِى ٱلْقُرْبَىٰ ۗ وَمَن يَقْتَرِفْ
حَسَنَةً نَّزِدْ لَهُۥ فِيهَا حُسْنًا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ
شَكُورٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds. Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin.' Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative. (23)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ ٱفْتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا ۖ فَإِن يَشَإِ
ٱللَّهُ يَخْتِمْ عَلَىٰ قَلْبِكَ ۗ وَيَمْحُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْبَٰطِلَ
وَيُحِقُّ ٱلْحَقَّ بِكَلِمَٰتِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ عَلِيمٌۢ بِذَاتِ
ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿٢٤﴾

Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?' If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (24)

Angels Praying for Mankind

We talked previously about the separate letters that begin several *sūrahs*. Here we have five of these, followed by the verse saying: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) Thus, in this way and following this pattern, God sent down His revelations to you and to messengers before you. It is made of words and phrases composed of those letters known to man. People know these words and phrases and grasp their meanings, but they cannot compose anything like it out of the letters they know so well.

At the same time, the unity of revelation is established. This comes from the same source as it is revealed by God, the Almighty, the Wise. Those who receive it are the messengers He sent across different generations. The message revealed is essentially the same, despite the fact that it was given to different recipients at different times. Thus we see the Divine message as a story beginning far back in ancient times, having numerous intertwined episodes, and following the same principles, like a mature tree graced with a large number of branches and firm, deep roots.

When this fact is well established in believers' hearts, they feel that their faith is well-founded, stable and authoritative. They are, thus, strongly attracted to the source of this revelation, who is 'God, the Almighty, the Wise.' They also value the bond between them and the believers who followed such revelations throughout all generations, since the family of believers goes far back in history, and they all turn ultimately to God. How can they abandon the straight path of the Divine message to take other, divergent ways that have unclear beginnings and lead nowhere?

The *sūrah* then adds other attributes belonging to God: "*His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 4) People are often deluded, thinking that they own something of what they have in their hands; it appears to be at their disposal and they use it for their own benefit. Theirs, however, is not true ownership. The true owner is God who creates, brings to life and deals death. He alone can give people whatever He wishes, withhold,

take away or replace what He chooses. He is the One who determines the nature of everything and conducts this in accordance with the law He has chosen. Everything, then, complies with this law and behaves according to it. Every single thing in the universe, thus, belongs to God, who is the sole owner, without partners. He is the '*Most High, the Supreme One.*' His ownership is marked by His supremacy, making everything else appear lowly and inferior.

When this truth is well established in our minds, we know to whom we should turn to request what we wish for good things, provisions and earnings. Since He is the owner of the heavens and the earth, it is He who can decide what to give. Moreover, being '*the Most High, the Supreme*', He does not degrade or demean those who stretch out their hands requesting what they want from Him, as they would feel if they made their requests to other creatures. The *sūrah* then gives us an aspect of the significance of God's sole ownership of the universe and His supremacy. We see this in the heavens that are almost rent asunder, overawed as they are by God's greatness, when they realize that some earth dwellers deviate from the right way. We also see this in the angels' action as they glorify their Lord and pray to Him to forgive those who live on earth: "*The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 5)

The 'heavens' are those creatures which we see above us wherever we are on earth and of which we know very little. We now know that these heavens include at least one hundred million galaxies, every one of which includes one hundred million stars like our sun which is larger than our earth by at least a million times. These galaxies, which humans have managed to establish with their telescopes, are scattered in space, with large distances between them, amounting to hundreds of thousands of light years. Yet these very heavens are almost rent asunder from above, fearing God, the Supreme, because some people on earth overlook His supremacy which the rest of the universe feels with a clear sense of awe.

"*The angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth.*" (Verse 5) The angels are creatures

whose obedience to God is absolute. Hence, they should be the most reassured of all creatures. Yet they never cease to extol God's praise because they feel His total supremacy and fear that they may fall short in extolling His glory. By contrast, humans, the earth dwellers, reject and deviate. Hence, the angels fear that God's anger may, thus, be incurred and they begin to pray to Him to forgive the people of earth for the sins they perpetrate. The verse may also refer to the angels praying for the forgiveness of believers, as stated in *Sūrah* 40, the Forgiving One: "*Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers.*" (40: 7) We see here how the angels dread that any act of disobedience is committed on earth, even by believers. They pray to God for forgiveness, knowing that He is surely '*Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*' (Verse 5)

This opening of the *sūrah* ends with a reference to those who take for themselves protectors other than God, when it has become clear that no one else in the universe can give any protection. In this way, He makes it clear to His messenger that he is not responsible for them. It is God who watches over them and He will deal with them as He likes: "*As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them.*" (Verse 6)

Those miserable people who seek protection with beings other than God, are like those who clutch nothing but thin air. They hold nothing in their hands. Little as they and their alleged protectors are, they appear to us weak and insignificant as they are subject to God's power. The Prophet, and the believers with him, need not think or worry about them. God will make His own decision about them.

This truth must be well established in the hearts of all believers so that they are reassured, and this whether the unbelievers appear to wield power on earth or not. No matter how arrogant and tyrannical the ones wielding power are, they remain insignificant as long as they do not derive their power from God, and as long as God watches over them and encompasses them with His might. The whole universe around them believes in God and they alone are the ones who deviate, just like an odd beat in a beautiful symphony. From another point of view, the believers are reassured as they learn that they are not held in

any way responsible for anyone who turns away and deviates. Their only task is to give sincere and sound counsel. It is God who ultimately holds people's hearts in His hand. With such reassurance, the believers can continue along their way, caring nothing for the unbelievers and their deviation.

The Mother City

> *So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire. Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. Have they chosen protectors other than Him? God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things.* (Verses 7–9)

Here we are back with the truth stated at the beginning, with this new aspect of the truth of revelation now closely intertwined. There is a clear link between the separate letters the *sūrah* begins with and the fact that the Qur'ān is revealed in Arabic. These letters constitute part of the Arabic alphabet, and the Qur'ān delivers its message in Arabic, for a particular purpose: "*in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it.*" (Verse 7) The Mother City is Makkah, which is honoured by the presence of God's Sacred House, the first ever built for worship. God has chosen that this Mother City and its surroundings should be the place where His final message is revealed, expressing the Qur'ān in its Arabic tongue, for His particular purpose: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

When we look today, with hindsight, reviewing events and circumstances, studying the line the message has followed to produce its results, we can partly understand God's wisdom behind the choice of this particular spot on earth, at that particular time, to be the base

of the final message addressed to all mankind. Its universal nature was made clear from its early days.

At the advent of this final Divine message, the earth was more or less divided between four empires: the Byzantine Empire, which stretched from Europe over some parts of Asia and Africa; the Persian Empire, which ruled large parts of Asia and some African areas; and also the Indian and Chinese Empires. The latter two were confined to their areas, each having its own faith and limited political relations outside of their territories. This isolation made the first two the real superpowers, which enjoyed far reaching influence over human life and its development. The two Divine religions, Judaism and Christianity, were in one way or another under the influence of these two empires, and were effectively controlled by the then political authorities controlling them. Hence, both religions suffered distortion.

Judaism in particular suffered persecution under the Byzantines at one stage and under the Persians at another. It had practically no power on earth. Several factors contributed to its becoming confined to the Children of Israel, with neither ambition nor desire to attract other communities.

Christianity, on the other hand, was born within the Byzantine Empire which ruled Palestine, Syria and Egypt where Christianity spread secretly. The Byzantine authorities launched a wicked persecution campaign against the Christian faith leading to massacres that claimed the lives of tens of thousands. When this decimation ended with the conversion of a Byzantine emperor to Christianity, he brought with him pagan Byzantine legends and Greek philosophy, which was also pagan in nature. These imparted an alien colour to Christianity, turning it into something totally different from its original Divine revelation. Moreover, political power in Byzantium continued to wield the real authority, allowing religion only a minor influence. In addition, the different Christian schools were at loggerheads with one another, thereby weakening the Church and threatening to engulf the whole empire in acrimony. In turn, this also led to further persecution of those who dissented from the official doctrine. Yet both parties, those who toed the official line and those who dissented from it, deviated from true Christianity.

The Arabian Environment

At this juncture, Islam was revealed. It was a message that aimed to save humanity from the corruption, persecution, immorality and blind ignorance that had spread into all populated areas. It aimed to lead humanity on a way to God, providing light and guidance. Hence, it was necessary that Islam should have power and authority in order to accomplish the great transformation in human life that was required. It was imperative, therefore, that Islam start its operation in a free land, over which none of those empires had any control, so as not to let any power that was alien to its nature influence it. On the contrary, it was necessary that Islam have the power to shape its own domain and to influence its own surroundings. The Arabian Peninsula, especially the Mother City and its neighbouring areas, provided the best place on earth for the emergence of Islam and from where it would start its global march.

There was no established government with laws, legislation, an army, a police force or complete authority in Arabia, ensuring proper control over its population as was the case in the empires we have described. Moreover, Arabia did not have a clear and well-defined religion. Indeed, the opposite was true: in Arabia there was a medley of pagan beliefs. People worshipped a great variety of deities, including angels, *jinn*, stars and idols. Although the Ka'bah and the Quraysh enjoyed some overall religious hegemony in the Arabian Peninsula, this did not constitute a real authority that could mount firm opposition to the new faith. Had it not been for their economic interests and special position, the Quraysh chiefs would not have opposed Islam as solidly as they actually did. They realized how hollow and confused their beliefs were. In this way, then, the loose and weak political and religious systems in Arabia provided the best environment for the emergence of the new Islamic faith, one where it could not be influenced by any real authority alien to its nature.

Moreover, Arabia's unique social make-up provided a measure of protection for this new message. The Arabian system was tribal, where each clan had its weight and position. When Muḥammad (peace be upon him) started preaching Islam, his Hāshimite clan provided him with protection, and the general tribal balance provided him with a

good opportunity to go about his task. Other clans did not wish to fight against the Hāshimite clan realizing that the majority of its people did not follow Muḥammad's faith. Indeed, the clans were very reluctant to assault any individual Muslim who had real clan affiliation. They left the task of punishing such individuals to their own families. Indeed, those weaker elements and slaves who embraced the faith were tortured by their own masters. Therefore, Abū Bakr used to buy such slaves and free them, thus making them immune to such persecution. Needless to say, this situation provided the new faith with a particularly suitable environment to establish itself. Furthermore, the qualities of the Arabs, including their bravery, warm-heartedness, pride and sense of honour stood them in good stead and qualified them to be the bearers of this new message.

At the time, the Arabian Peninsula benefited from a suitably fertile soil to support a general renaissance. It had people with various abilities and potentials ready to serve such a development as and when it started. Experience had been accumulated as a result of trips to the nearest areas within the Byzantine and Persian Empires. The most notable of these trips were the winter one to the south and the summer one to the north. These are mentioned in the Qur'ān: "*For the tradition of the Quraysh, their tradition of travelling in winter and summer. Let them worship the Lord of this House, who provided them with food against hunger, and with security against fear.*" (106: 4) Many other circumstances helped to build a great wealth of experience which was coupled with a natural readiness to receive the great task assigned to Arabia, making it the birthplace of God's final message to mankind. When Islam began to be revealed, it made use of this wealth of experience and utilized all latent potential. It was thus able to tap the readily available Arabian resources to serve its message. Perhaps this explains the presence of a large number of great men among the Prophet's Companions such as Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, 'Alī, Ḥamzah, al-'Abbās, Abū 'Ubaydah, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Khālid ibn al-Walīd, Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh, Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī and many others who warmed to Islam and embraced it. No doubt all these people were able to rise to a far higher standard under Islam, but they had the potential to so rise in the first place.

The Division of Mankind

Thus the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic to warn the Mother City and its surrounding area. When the Arabian Peninsula moved out of ignorance into Islam and became totally Muslim, it carried the banner of Islam, moving with it to the East and to the West. These Muslims presented Islam and the human system based on it to the world, since, by nature, this message is addressed to all humanity. They were the best and most suitable people to advocate it, stemming as it did from the most suitable place for its birth and growth.

It was by God's design that the Prophet lived until Arabia, with all its population, embraced Islam. The land chosen to be the cradle of Islam now permanently adopted the full colours of the new faith. Likewise, the language to express it and deliver it to the world was clearly chosen. Arabic had by that time achieved full maturity so as to be most suitable for delivering God's message to all corners of the world. Had Arabic been a deficient or immature language, it would not have been able to embody the message in the first place, or to deliver it to people outside Arabia. In short, the language, the people and the environment were all the best suited for this great universal event. Thus, wherever we look in our attempt to understand God's purpose, wisdom and choice, we find a long list of positive factors converging together to provide the new message with the conditions most suited for its welcome. This confirms God's statement: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

> *So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.* (Verse 7)

The hardest, most fundamental and often repeated warning in the Qur'ān is that concerning the Day of Gathering, when God will gather together all creatures from all generations and places, prior to dividing them into two groups according to what they did during their life on earth, the place where people choose what to do: "*some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7)

Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. (Verse 8)

God could, if He wished, create people in a different form so as to make their behaviour and actions uniform. Had He done so, their end would have been the same and they would all go either to heaven or to hell. However, in His limitless glory, God created man for a purpose, assigning to him the task of building human life on earth. In order for this task to be accomplished He made it necessary for man to have special qualities distinguishing him from both angels and devils, as also from all types of creation with a nature of singular direction. In this respect, then, He gave man qualities and abilities which make some people lean towards guidance, light and good action, while others lean towards error, darkness and evil action. Each group follows one of these two susceptibilities inherent in human nature, leading them to the end determined for the type of action they choose: "*some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7) Thus God will "*admit to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) His decisions are based on His knowledge of the conditions of both parties and whether they follow guidance and thus deserve His grace or go astray and thus deserve His punishment.

It has already been mentioned that some people take protectors for themselves other than God. Now, the *sūrah* makes it clear that "*the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) The fact is that their alleged protectors do not exist.

Again, the *sūrah* disapprovingly asks: "*Have they chosen protectors other than Him?*" (Verse 9) It follows this rhetorical question with a statement making it clear that God is the only protector who is able to do everything. His power is clearly seen in the fact that He brings the dead back to life. This is indeed the action which shows His unique power at its most splendid: "*God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead.*" (Verse 9) His power is then stated to be total and to extend over all beings, with no limits whatsoever: "*He has power over all things.*" (Verse 9)

Who Judges in Disputes?

The *sūrah* returns to the central issue, identifying the ultimate point of reference in judging any dispute. It is this new revelation from God, containing His judgement. This ensures that changeable personal preferences and fleeting desires cannot influence life under the Divine code that admits no prejudice:

> *Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn. He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything.* (Verses 10–12)

These verses express a number of facts, but the way these are stated and their sequence and juxtaposition in this short passage is truly remarkable, requiring proper reflection. Upon such reflection, the interlinking between their inner and outer aspects is both subtle and precise. Everything over which dispute arises between people should be judged by God: "*Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God.*" (Verse 10) God has made His judgement clear in this Qur'ān, stating His final word concerning this life and the life to come. He also established the code of living which people should follow in their personal and community lives, in their dealings among themselves, their system of government and their moral values and manners. He has made all this abundantly clear, making the Qur'ān a comprehensive constitution for human life, with a scope that is broader than their own constitutions. Therefore, should dispute arise between them, the right judgement is ready for them, outlined in His revelation delivered to them by His messenger.

When this truth has been established, the verse quotes the Prophet's statement whereby he clearly submits himself and all his affairs to God,

turning to Him in all situations: "*Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn.*" (Verse 10) Thus, the Prophet's statement that he turns to God, places all his trust in Him and relies on Him in all situations, occurs at the most suitable point, serving as it does as a comment on the preceding rule. When God's messenger who receives guidance from God declares his attitude in these terms, how can other people refer their disputes to anyone else or place their trust in other beings? Knowing that God is his Lord who provides everything for him and guides him to what is best, the Prophet makes his choice, turning to Him alone. How can others make a different choice?

When this is established in a believer's heart, he sees his way ahead, clearly defined and well enlightened. He does not look for any other way. He is confident, reassured, knowing where to go. He entertains no doubt because he knows that God takes care of him and protects him. Moreover, he attaches a high value to his system which he derives from God's revelations, clear in his mind that no system can be superior to God's word.

A further comment is then made to consolidate this truth: "*He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 11) The One who revealed the Qur'ān to provide final judgement on all people's disputes is "*the Originator of the heavens and the earth,*" who controls them. The law that governs the heavens and the earth is His final judgement on all that concerns them. Human life is only a part of what takes place in the heavens and the earth. Therefore, His judgement on human matters ensures harmony between human life and the life of the great universe.

God, to whose judgement they should refer all their disputes, is the One who created them and moulded their souls: "*He made mates for you from among yourselves.*" (Verse 11) Thus He designed your life giving it its very foundation. He knows what is best for you and what suits your life, putting it in harmony with the rest of His creation: "*just as He made mates for animals.*" (Verse 11) This unity in biological

form confirms the unity of will and design. Hence, people and animals multiply and procreate in the same natural process. By contrast, He is alone in the way He is, with no comparability to anything or anyone: "*Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him.*" (Verse 11) Human nature accepts this without hesitation. The Creator of all cannot be compared to anything He creates. Therefore, His creatures refer to Him when they differ. They cannot refer to anyone else alongside Him because nothing is comparable to Him.

Although God, in His limitless glory, is beyond comparability with anyone or anything, contact between Him and His creation is not severed. On the contrary, "*He alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 11) His judgement is that of the One who knows, hears and sees.

Given that He makes His judgement final in all people's disputes, this can only mean that this rule is based on the fact that having originated the heavens and the earth and set their laws in operation, He continues to hold their keys: "*His are the keys of the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 12) Since mankind are only part of what lives in the heavens and earth, the same fact applies to them, which means that the keys and treasures of the universe belong to God. Moreover, it is He who provides them with sustenance, determining its measure in the same way as He conducts all affairs: "*He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills.*" (Verse 12) It is He who gives them the food they eat and the water they drink, providing everything they need in their lives. Can they, then, refer to anyone else for judgement in their affairs? It is the most natural procedure for people to turn to the One who controls all this according to His perfect knowledge: "*He has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 12) Needless to say, the One who knows everything is the One who can make a final judgement in all fairness.

This is just one example of how the meanings of the component parts of the *sūrah*'s verses converge in complete harmony and perfect subtlety to work on the human heart. It is akin to the harmonious tones that combine to make a superb melody.

The Same Faith of Old

Once more the *sūrah* addresses its central theme:

> *In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.* (Verses 13–15)

The *sūrah* began with a general reference to the unity of the source of all Divine faiths: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) Now it gives more details of this fact, pointing out that the legislation God has enacted for Muslims is, in essence, the same as He legislated for Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, requiring them all to establish the Divine faith and not to split into factions over it. This requires that they, in turn, steadfastly pursue the Divine code of living, paying no heed to the desires of those who fall into dispute. This Divine faith is thus meant to govern human life, while those who argue about God have no leg to stand on. They are the ones who are warned of the painful punishment they might incur.

This passage enjoys the same level of perfect harmony as the preceding one: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had*

enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.'" (Verse 13) Thus the *sūrah* confirms the truth we explained at its very outset: God is the source of all Divine religions, starting far back in history. A little touch is added here which has a pleasant, subtle effect on every believer. He or she looks out to see who were their predecessors on this long line only to find that they were those noble elite: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be on them all). Every believer then realizes that he has joined their procession, travelling the same way they travelled. He will then enjoy his journey along that way, no matter how much trouble, persecution or deprivation he suffers. Who would not put up with trouble, knowing that it is only transient, when he is assured of the company of such an elite nobility?

Moreover, there is a profound sense of peace between believers in the one Divine faith who implement His law. No conflict or dispute arises between them. They feel their strong bond urging them to collaborate and understand each other so that they can maintain the link between present and past.

Since the religion God ordained for the Muslims who believe in Muḥammad is the same as He enjoined on Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, why do the followers of Moses and Jesus fight against each other? Indeed, what causes fighting between the followers of different Christian sects? Why do the followers of Moses and Jesus go to war against the followers of Muḥammad? And why do those idolaters who claim to follow Abraham's faith wage a war against Muslims? Should not all these group together under the one banner hoisted by God's last messenger? The same order was issued to them all: "*Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.*" (Verse 13) Only when they unite under this banner do they uphold the faith, fulfil its duties, maintain its path and work under the same banner hoisted high in succession by Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus until it was eventually carried by Muḥammad, who received the final testament.

The idolater Arabs in the Mother City and its surrounding area, who claimed to follow Abraham's faith, adopted a different stance towards the new faith: "*Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on*

them to accept." (Verse 13) They found it hard that revelation should be vouchsafed to Muḥammad, when they wanted it to be given to a person of high position and authority among them. Muḥammad's personal qualities of unblemished honesty and perfect reliability, which they readily acknowledged, and his lineage descending from the noblest family among them, did not match, in their view, the status of a tribal chief who exercised power in his tribe. In short, it was far too difficult for them to accept that their own religious authority, founded on paganism and its legends, had come to an end. They realized that its ending threatened the economic and personal interests that such authority had given them. Hence they held on to their pagan beliefs, refusing to accept the message of God's oneness advocated by His noble messenger. Similarly difficult for them was that they were told that their idolatrous ancestors were in error. Therefore, they maintained their folly choosing to cast themselves in hell rather than acknowledge the truth.

The *sūrah* comments on their attitude stating that God chooses whom He wills and guides everyone who wishes to follow His guidance: "*God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him.*" (Verse 13) He drew Muḥammad to Himself and chose him to deliver His message. He always leaves the way wide open for anyone who turns to Him and seeks His guidance.

Division in Religion

Again the *sūrah* speaks of the followers of earlier messengers who divided into sects and groups although the messengers preached the same faith: "*They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14) Their divisions did not come about as a result of ignorance, or because they did not know the single source that grouped their messengers and faiths together. They divided after knowledge was given to them. This division was caused by selfish rivalry and mutual envy. Thus, they were not only unjust to the truth but also to themselves. There was no

single reason based on the true faith for their division. Had they been true to their faith, they would have remained united.

They deserved to be immediately taken to task in requital for their division and deviation, but God, in His wisdom, had already ordained to allow them time, up to a specified point only He knows: "*Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them.*" (Verse 14) Thus, the truth is established and falsehood is seen in its true guise. Matters are settled in this present life, but judgement is deferred until the Day of Resurrection. The generations that came after the division that split the followers of every one of God's messengers received the faith and the Divine book uncertain of its truth. Division, then, had allowed doubt and confusion to creep in, making people unable to determine which of the numerous doctrines and groups was right: "*As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14)

Faith cannot be taken in this way. Faith is the solid rock on which a believer stands ensuring that he remains steadfast in his beliefs, even when the whole world around him is shaking hard. Faith is his guiding star that assures him of his way when different forces try to pull him in opposite directions. When faith itself becomes subject to such strong doubts, nothing remains certain in man's mind. He cannot be sure which way to take and which course to follow. Reassurance is no longer available to him. God revealed the Divine faith so that those who follow it would know the way that leads them to Him and ensures His pleasure. In turn, they too would be able to lead other people along the right way, unaffected by doubt or uncertainty. When they themselves become immersed in doubt, however, they cannot lead anyone anywhere.

Such was the state the followers of earlier prophets were in at the time Islam was revealed. Syed Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī, an eminent Indian scholar, writes:

> Great religions became playthings in the hands of debased clergymen who corrupted and twisted them beyond recognition, so much so that, if it were possible for their founders to return to the physical life, they would not have recognized them.

As a result of the moral debasement of the great centres of civilization and general disorder and unrest, people everywhere became entangled in their internal problems. They had no message to offer to the world. The world had become hollow from within; its life-springs had dried up. It possessed neither the light of religious guidance for personal conduct, nor any abiding and rational principle for running a state.[1]

Additionally, J.H. Denison, a European author, writes:

In the fifth and sixth centuries the civilized world stood on the verge of chaos. The old emotional cultures that had made civilization possible, since they had given to men a sense of unity and of reverence for their rulers, had broken down, and nothing had been found adequate to take their place...

It seemed then that the great civilization that it had taken four thousand years to construct was on the verge of disintegration, and that mankind was likely to return to that condition of barbarism where every tribe and sect was against the next, and law and order were unknown. *The old tribal sanctions had lost their power. Hence the old imperial methods would no longer operate.* The new sanctions created by Christianity were working division and destruction instead of unity and order. It was a time fraught with tragedy. Civilization, like a gigantic tree whose foliage had overreached the world and whose branches had borne the golden fruits of art and science and literature, stood tottering, its trunk no longer alive with the flowing sap of devotion and reverence, but rotted to the core...

It was among these people that the man was born who was to unite the whole known world of the east and south... Mohammed...[2]

1. Nadwī, Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī, *Islam and the World*, Leicester, 2005, p. 2.

2. Denison, J.H., *Emotion as the Basis of Civilization*, New York and London, 1928, pp. 265–269.

– This quotation runs in the Arabic text as one continuous paragraph. Apparently the author used an Arabic translation which was an abridged one, with some difference of emphasis in places. The italicized sentence is omitted in the Arabic text, but it was felt necessary to include it here in order not to affect the author's flow. – Editor's note.

It is because of such divisions among the followers of earlier messengers and the doubts engulfing their subsequent generations, and because the leadership of mankind was in desperate need of someone who was certain of the way to God, that the last messenger, Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), was sent to all mankind. God commanded him to deliver His message, holding firm to it, paying no heed to the conflicting creeds around him. He was to announce the rebirth of the Divine faith embodied in the one message that God gave to all prophets:

> *Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.* (Verse 15)

This is a new leadership for all mankind; a strong leadership, sure of its way and firm in its beliefs. It advocates its message equipped with true insight, and follows God's orders without deviation, steering away from all conflicting forces. This new leadership of mankind declares that the Divine message is one and the way to which it guides people is the same. Thus, all Divine faith comes from one source and mankind must turn to that source only: "*Say: I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high.*" (Verse 15) Its constitution and policy is based on truth and justice: "*I am commanded to ensure justice between you.*" (Verse 15) This new leadership has definite authority enabling it to declare justice among all mankind even at the time when it was confined to the narrow valleys of Makkah, where its followers suffered unrelenting persecution. Yet its authority was clear to all. It clearly announces that: (1) the Lord of the universe is the One Lord: "*God is our Lord and your Lord.*" (Verse 15); (2) everyone is responsible for their own actions: "*To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds.*" (Verse 15); (3) all argument is ended as God's final word is given: "*Let there be no argument between us and you.*" (Verse 15); and

(4) all affairs are left to God for His final judgement: "*God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.*" (Verse 15)

This single verse with short, clear and decisive statements describes the nature of this last message in all its clarity. It is a message that means to follow its own way, unaffected by people's desires. It aims to extend its authority so as to ensure justice between all people. Its objective is to show the one way leading to God since it is the only way defined by all messages.

As the issues have thus been clarified and the community of believers have assuredly responded to God's message, the argument of those still disputing about God appears to be both singular and trivial, lacking basis and weight. A final word is stated about them making clear that they will have to face the punishment they have been warned against: "*As for those who argue about God after He has been acknowledged, their argument is null and void in their Lord's sight: anger will fall upon them and severe suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 16) Whoever posits an argument that is null and void in God's sight has nothing to offer. Not only are his arguments proven false in this life, but in the life to come he will incur God's anger and face severe punishment for persisting with such falsehood.

Hastening the Last Hour

Yet another round is started to drive the central theme of the *sūrah* home to us:

> *It is God who has bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, and established the balance. For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near. Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth. Those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray. God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty. To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come.* (Verses 17–20)

It is God who revealed His book to set forth the truth, and it is He who ordained justice, making His book the criterion to judge in all disputes among the followers of earlier religions, as also in all disputes that arise between people. He based all His laws on true and accurate justice, which is comparable to a balance that weighs values, rights and actions. The same verse also mentions the Last Hour, which is a frequent Qur'ānic reference to the Day of Judgement. Its mention is appropriate because it is the time set for the final judgement based on absolute justice. The Last Hour belongs to the realm that is beyond the reach of human perception. Hence, no one can be sure of when it is due: "*For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near.*" (Verse 17) People prefer to ignore it when it is close to them. It will inevitably bring them to the fair reckoning which takes every little detail into account, overlooking nothing.

The *sūrah* describes the different attitudes of people concerning the Last Hour: "*Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth.*" (Verse 18) The ones who do not believe in it neither feel its seriousness nor understand what awaits them when it comes. Hence, it is no wonder that they take a frivolous attitude asking for it to be hastened. In contrast, the believers are certain of it and, as a result, they shudder as they think about it, dreading its outcome. They know what it is like when it finally comes. They also know it to be the truth, for they have always had their bond with the truth. Whereas, "*those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray.*" (Verse 18) Having gone far astray, it is difficult for them to turn back.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the sustenance God, out of His grace, provides for all people. "*God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty.*" (Verse 19) The link between this verse and the previous one speaking about the Last Hour and the different attitudes people take towards it seems unclear. However, it becomes very apparent when we read the next verse: "*To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come.*" (Verse 20)

God provides for all His servants, the good and the bad, the believer and the unbeliever. People are too weak to be able to provide for themselves. God has brought them into life and given them what meets their basic needs. Had He chosen not to provide for the unbelievers and the wrongdoers, they would not have had anything and would have died of thirst and hunger. Had this been the scenario, God's purpose of giving them life and allowing them a chance to do what may be counted for or against them would not have been fulfilled. Therefore, He attached the question of provisions to different factors related to life situations and personal abilities. He made it part of the test people undergo in this life and the result of which is known only in the life to come. Thus, it has nothing to do with belief or unbelief, goodness of character or personality.

Furthermore, God has made both this life and the life to come as a harvest for people, and they choose the type of harvest they want. A person who wants to have the harvest of the life to come will work to achieve this. God will help such people because of what they intend and bless their work. They will not only have their harvest in the life to come, but will also have whatever God has apportioned to them of provisions in this life. They will lose nothing of it. On the contrary, their provisions in this world may be, in as far as they are concerned, the means to achieve their harvest in the life to come. Such people use what God provides for them, investing, enjoying and spending it only in ways that are acceptable to, and please Him. By contrast, those who desire only a harvest in this life will have the provisions God has allocated for them, denying them nothing of this, but they will have nothing in the life to come. They do not work for such a harvest, and as a result, they receive nothing.

A glance at each group is sufficient to expose the folly of the one who desires only their harvest in this life. God grants both groups the provisions they will have in this life as He has determined. No one will miss out on any of it. What is achieved in the life to come is that which people actually desire and work for.

Among those who work only for the harvest of this life we find some who are rich and some who are poor, according to their means of earning a livelihood. Such means are interlinked with general

situations, local circumstances and personal abilities. The same applies in equal measure to those who desire a harvest in the life to come. There is absolutely no difference between the two groups in this present life concerning their livelihood. The difference, however, will be obvious in the life to come. So what folly makes anyone abandon the harvest of the life to come, when this will not change his lot in this life even by a small measure?

Ultimately, the matter is determined by the truth and the balance established by the book God has revealed. Truth and justice are evidently seen in providing sustenance for all people, and all living things, as also in increasing the harvest of the life to come or denying the same to those who desire only this present life.

Fearing One's Deeds

The basic truth providing the central theme of the *sūrah* again comes in for further discussion:

> *Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned? Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them. Painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers. You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them. And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds. Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin.' Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.* (Verses 21–23)

The *sūrah* earlier stated that what God has legislated for the Muslim community is the same as He had enjoined on Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. In other words, all this is embodied in what God revealed to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). At this point, the *sūrah* employs a rhetorical question addressing the unbelievers' beliefs and practices:

essentially, these are contrary to what God has ordained in His messages, so who ordained the same for the unbelievers, without God's sanction?

"*Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned?*" (Verse 21) None of God's creatures may legislate anything that is at variance with what He legislates. It is God alone who legislates for all His creation. It is He who has created the universe and conducts its affairs through natural laws He has set in operation. Human life is merely a small gear in the great cog of the universe. Therefore, its law should be consistent with the laws governing the universe and its operation. This can only be achieved when the law of human life is enacted by the One who has full knowledge of universal law. No one other than God has such knowledge. Hence, no one can be entrusted with the task of legislating for human life.

Although the logic of this fact is abundantly clear, still there are many who dispute it or who are not convinced of its truth. They dare to enact laws and legislation that are at variance with God's law, claiming that they are only choosing what is good for their peoples, ensuring that their laws fit their specific circumstances. In doing so they suggest that they know better than God and are wiser than Him. The only other justification they put forward is that they believe in some beings whom they allege to be God's partners, and that it is these who enact laws for them that are not sanctioned by God. There can be no greater folly than such impudence.

God has enacted for mankind laws that He knows to be in harmony with their nature on the one hand and with the nature of the universe they live in on the other. Thus, His law ensures the maximum cooperation and harmony among mankind as also with universal powers. In all this, He has put in place basic principles. He has left it for people to enact legislation concerning the details that suit their needs according to their level of development, provided that such legislation remains within the framework of the principles He has laid down. Should people differ over something in this regard, they should refer the matter to God and the balance He has established through these principles. People must make sure that every detailed law they enact fits with this balance. In this way, the source of legislation remains one and the ultimate word remains God's. He is indeed the best of all judges. Anything that differs with this constitutes deviation from God's

law and the religion He ordained for Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them all).

"*Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them.*" (Verse 21) God has made His decree to defer judgement to the final day. Had he not decreed such deferment, He would have made His judgement now, punishing those who deviate from His law. However, He postpones this to the Day of Judgement when "*painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 21) Such suffering is in requital for their wrongdoing. Can there be anything more erroneous than choosing man-made laws in preference to God's law?

Those wrongdoers are shown as they will be on the Day of Judgement, afraid of what will happen to them. During their lives on earth, however, they entertained no such fear. On the contrary, they ridiculed the reckoning and asked for it to be hastened: "*You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them.*" (Verse 22) In the Arabic original they are described as 'full of fear for what they have done', as if their deeds are some fearful beast. Yet they performed these deeds with their own hands, enjoying their actions. Still, when they face these same deeds they are full of fear, realizing that they are '*bound to fall back on them,*' as though the deeds themselves are transformed into a punishment they cannot avoid.

Conversely, we see the believers who used to be in awe of what would happen on that day now feeling safe, reassured, enjoying what God grants them: "*And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds.*" (Verses 22–23) The whole image is one of bliss and happiness. Those believers are '*in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise*', where they will have '*whatever they wish from their Lord.*' There is no limit to His bounty, which is indeed supreme. This is, then, the good news that God gives to His righteous servants. It is good news that is shown to be ready, immediate, confirming the earlier promise of good things to come.

With such a pleasant image imparting an air of relaxed enjoyment, the Prophet is instructed to say to them that he seeks no reward from

them for the guidance he gives them, leading them to such lasting bliss and sparing them the painful suffering. He only gives them such guidance because he loves them; they are his kinsfolk. This is enough reward for him: "*Say: No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin. Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.*" (Verse 23)

The Prophet enjoyed relations with every single clan of the Quraysh tribe. Hence, he was keen that they should take up the guidance he was giving because it would bring them endless benefit. His motivation in all this was the affection he had for them as his kindred. He considered this as sufficient reward for his efforts.

This, then, is the meaning that sparked in my mind whenever I read this Qur'ānic expression about the Prophet's reward being merely an act of affection he does to his kinsfolk. There is, however, a different interpretation of it which I will state here because it is included in the authentic *Ḥadīth* anthology of Imām al-Bukhārī. Ṭāwūs, a scholar from the *Tābi'īn* generation, asking 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās about this phrase. Another scholar, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, answered first saying: 'It refers to the relatives of the Prophet.' Ibn 'Abbās said: 'You have been too quick! The Prophet had relations among every clan of the Quraysh. Hence he said to them that all he asked for was that they should be kind to his own kinsfolk.'" According to this interpretation, the verse should be translated as: "*Say: No reward do I ask of you for this other than the affection due to kin.*" This means that they should stop causing him harm, which is something due one's relatives, and that they should listen to the guidance he gave them. This would be his reward from them. This interpretation by Ibn 'Abbās is closer to the verse's meaning than that of Sa'īd ibn Jubayr. However, I still feel that the interpretation I suggested is closer to the point. God knows best the meanings of His words.

Thus, within the context of the gardens of paradise and the good news he gives them, the Prophet reminds them that he asks no reward for anything he gives them. People normally demand hefty fees for advice that is well below what the Prophet gave his people. This is all part of God's grace. He does not deal with people according to principles of commerce, nor according to justice; instead He deals with them in accordance with the principles of grace and bounty: "*Whoever*

does good, We shall increase it for him." (Verse 23) It is not merely that the Prophet seeks no reward whatsoever from people; they are further promised increase in their reward for good deeds. In addition, they shall have forgiveness and their deeds will be appreciated: "*God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.*" (Verse 23)

God's Word of Truth

Once more the *sūrah* refers to the basic fact behind its central theme:

> *Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?' If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.* (Verse 24)

This verse tackles the last excuse the unbelievers offer to justify their attitude to revelation: "*Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?'*" (Verse 24) Is this why they do not believe the Prophet, claiming that God has not revealed anything to him? Such a claim is invalid. God would not allow anyone to fabricate lies about Him, claiming to receive revelations from Him when he does not, without taking that person to task. He is easily able to seal such a person's heart rendering him incapable of saying anything like the Qur'ān. He is also able to expose the falsehood such a person says and establish the truth: "*If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words.*" (Verse 24) All Muḥammad's thoughts are known to God, even before Muḥammad (peace be upon him) expresses them: "*He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verse 24)

This last excuse is, thus, seen to be hollow and unfounded. Moreover, it is contrary to what is well established of God's knowledge of everyone's inner thoughts, His ability to accomplish what He wills and His law that remains in operation, establishing the truth and blotting out all falsehood. Thus, the revelation of the Qur'ān is truly from God, and what Muḥammad (peace be upon him) says is the truth. Claiming anything different from this is no more than a false allegation, one that is immersed in error.

2

God's Signs in the Created World

It is He who accepts the repentance of His servants and who pardons bad deeds. He knows everything you do. (25)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى يَقْبَلُ ٱلتَّوْبَةَ عَنْ عِبَادِهِۦ وَيَعْفُوا۟
عَنِ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

He responds to those who believe and do righteous deeds, and gives them much more of His bounty; but as for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them. (26)

وَيَسْتَجِيبُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ وَيَزِيدُهُم مِّن فَضْلِهِۦ ۚ
وَٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all. (27)

وَلَوْ بَسَطَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلرِّزْقَ لِعِبَادِهِۦ لَبَغَوْا۟ فِى
ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَٰكِن يُنَزِّلُ بِقَدَرٍ مَّا يَشَآءُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
بِعِبَادِهِۦ خَبِيرٌۢ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٢٧﴾

It is He who sends down rain when they have lost all hope, and spreads His grace far and wide. He is the Protector, worthy of all praise. (28)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُنَزِّلُ ٱلْغَيْثَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ
مَا قَنَطُوا۟ وَيَنشُرُ رَحْمَتَهُۥ ۚ وَهُوَ
ٱلْوَلِىُّ ٱلْحَمِيدُ ﴿٢٨﴾

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ خَلْقُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ
وَمَا بَثَّ فِيهِمَا مِن دَآبَّةٍ ۚ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ جَمْعِهِمْ
إِذَا يَشَآءُ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and all the living creatures which He placed in them. He has the power to gather them all whenever He will. (29)

وَمَآ أَصَٰبَكُم مِّن مُّصِيبَةٍ
فَبِمَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِيكُمْ وَيَعْفُوا۟
عَن كَثِيرٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. (30)

وَمَآ أَنتُم بِمُعْجِزِينَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَمَا لَكُم
مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مِن وَلِىٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿٣١﴾

Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support. (31)

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِ ٱلْجَوَارِ فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ كَٱلْأَعْلَٰمِ ﴿٣٢﴾

And among His signs are the ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. (32)

إِن يَشَأْ يُسْكِنِ ٱلرِّيحَ فَيَظْلَلْنَ رَوَاكِدَ
عَلَىٰ ظَهْرِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّكُلِّ
صَبَّارٍ شَكُورٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea. In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God; (33)

أَوْ يُوبِقْهُنَّ بِمَا كَسَبُوا۟ وَيَعْفُ
عَن كَثِيرٍ ﴿٣٤﴾

or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought and yet He forgives much. (34)

Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them. (35)

وَيَعْلَمَ ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِنَا
مَا لَهُم مِّن مَّحِيصٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord; (36)

فَمَآ أُوتِيتُم مِّن شَىْءٍ فَمَتَٰعُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ
وَمَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَىٰ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟
وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

who shun grave sins and gross indecencies; and who, when angered, will forgive; (37)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَجْتَنِبُونَ كَبَٰٓئِرَ ٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْفَوَٰحِشَ
وَإِذَا مَا غَضِبُوا۟ هُمْ يَغْفِرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

who respond to their Lord, attend regularly to their prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and give generously out of what We have provided for them; (38)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَجَابُوا۟ لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا۟
ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا
رَزَقْنَٰهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

and who, when oppressed, defend themselves. (39)

وَٱلَّذِينَ إِذَآ أَصَابَهُمُ ٱلْبَغْىُ هُمْ يَنتَصِرُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

An evil deed is requited by an evil like it, but the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God. He does not love wrongdoers. (40)

وَجَزَٰٓؤُا۟ سَيِّئَةٍ سَيِّئَةٌ مِّثْلُهَا ۖ فَمَنْ
عَفَا وَأَصْلَحَ فَأَجْرُهُۥ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

وَلَمَنِ انتَصَرَ بَعْدَ ظُلْمِهِۦ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ
مَا عَلَيْهِم مِّن سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤١﴾

However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. (41)

إِنَّمَا ٱلسَّبِيلُ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يَظْلِمُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ
وَيَبْغُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٤٢﴾

Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store. (42)

وَلَمَن صَبَرَ وَغَفَرَ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمِنْ
عَزْمِ ٱلْأُمُورِ ﴿٤٣﴾

As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve. (43)

وَمَن يُضْلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِن وَلِىٍّ مِّنۢ
بَعْدِهِۦ ۗ وَتَرَى ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ لَمَّا رَأَوُا۟
ٱلْعَذَابَ يَقُولُونَ هَلْ إِلَىٰ مَرَدٍّ
مِّن سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him. When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' (44)

وَتَرَىٰهُمْ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَيْهَا خَٰشِعِينَ
مِنَ ٱلذُّلِّ يَنظُرُونَ مِن طَرْفٍ خَفِىٍّ ۗ
وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِنَّ ٱلْخَٰسِرِينَ
ٱلَّذِينَ خَسِرُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَأَهْلِيهِمْ يَوْمَ
ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ فِى عَذَابٍ
مُّقِيمٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance. The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. (45)

No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward. (46)

وَمَا كَانَ لَهُم مِّنْ أَوْلِيَآءَ يَنصُرُونَهُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَمَن يُضْلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِن سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤٦﴾

Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins. (47)

ٱسْتَجِيبُوا۟ لِرَبِّكُم مِّن قَبْلِ أَن يَأْتِىَ يَوْمٌ لَّا مَرَدَّ لَهُۥ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ مَا لَكُم مِّن مَّلْجَإٍ يَوْمَئِذٍ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن نَّكِيرٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you]. When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude. (48)

فَإِنْ أَعْرَضُوا۟ فَمَآ أَرْسَلْنَٰكَ عَلَيْهِمْ حَفِيظًا ۖ إِنْ عَلَيْكَ إِلَّا ٱلْبَلَٰغُ ۗ وَإِنَّآ إِذَآ أَذَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ مِنَّا رَحْمَةً فَرِحَ بِهَا ۖ وَإِن تُصِبْهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌۢ بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ فَإِنَّ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ كَفُورٌ ﴿٤٨﴾

To God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. He creates what He will. He grants female offspring to whomever He will, and male to whomever He will; (49)

لِلَّهِ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَآءُ ۚ يَهَبُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ إِنَٰثًا وَيَهَبُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ ٱلذُّكُورَ ﴿٤٩﴾

أَوْ يُزَوِّجُهُمْ ذُكْرَانًا وَإِنَاثًا ۖ وَيَجْعَلُ مَن
يَشَاءُ عَقِيمًا ۚ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

or gives both male and female to whomever He will, and causes whomever He will to be barren. He is all-knowing, infinite in His power. (50)

وَمَا كَانَ لِبَشَرٍ أَن يُكَلِّمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا
أَوْ مِن وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا
فَيُوحِيَ بِإِذْنِهِ مَا يَشَاءُ ۚ إِنَّهُ عَلِيٌّ
حَكِيمٌ ﴿٥١﴾

It is not granted to any human being that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will. He is Exalted, Wise. (51)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ رُوحًا مِّنْ أَمْرِنَا ۚ
مَا كُنتَ تَدْرِي مَا الْكِتَابُ وَلَا الْإِيمَانُ
وَلَٰكِن جَعَلْنَاهُ نُورًا نَّهْدِي بِهِ مَن نَّشَاءُ
مِنْ عِبَادِنَا ۚ وَإِنَّكَ لَتَهْدِي إِلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ
مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, (52)

صِرَاطِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ
وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۗ أَلَا إِلَى اللَّهِ تَصِيرُ
الْأُمُورُ ﴿٥٣﴾

the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return. (53)

Overview

In this second part of the *sūrah*, the discussion continues to point to signs confirming the truth of faith within people's own selves and in the wide horizons. Further discussion is added about God's power and its evidence in people's surroundings and what affects their livelihood. The distinctive qualities of believers also come in for discussion. Towards the end of the *sūrah* we have further discussions on what the first part focused on, namely, revelation, its nature and how it is delivered. The two parts are closely linked, as both address the human heart and put the way to faith before us.

Affluence and People's Behaviour

> *It is He who accepts the repentance of His servants and pardons bad deeds. He knows everything you do. He responds to those who believe and do righteous deeds, and gives them much more of His bounty; but as for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them. If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all.* (Verses 25–27)

These verses follow immediately after the verses that show the wrongdoers dreading having to face what they have done given it will inevitably fall back on them. Those verses also painted an image of the believers as they revel in their rewards, secure in the flowering meadows of paradise. Moreover, those earlier verses confirmed what the Prophet delivered to them of God's message and stated that God is fully aware of what their hearts may harbour.

As this second part opens, it calls on people to turn to God and abandon their erroneous ways before a final judgement is passed on them. The door to repentance is left wide open. God Almighty accepts repentance and pardons bad deeds. Hence, there is no need to despair, go further into disobedience, or panic because of the sins they have committed. God knows what they do, and He certainly knows sincere

repentance and accepts it, just as He knows their past sins and pardons them for these.

Again the *sūrah* refers to what believers and unbelievers will receive in reward or punishment. Those who believe and do good deeds are the ones who respond to their Lord's call. He, therefore, gives them an increase of His bounty. By contrast, "*As for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 26) Yet the door to repentance, which will spare the repentant all suffering, is open to all at all times. Any unbeliever who repents will qualify for God's bounty which is, in the life to come, plentiful, unlimited. In this life, however, it is given according to a set criterion. God knows that in their lives on earth, human beings cannot cope with God's bounty should it be given to them without measure: "*If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all.*" (Verse 27)

Compared to the limitless bounty granted in the hereafter, the provisions people have in this life, no matter how abundant they may seem, are very small indeed. God knows that His human creatures can only cope with a small measure of richness. If He were to grant them abundance, of the sort He grants them in the life to come, they would behave with much insolence. They are too small to maintain their balance; too weak to cope with their burdens when these exceed a certain limit. God is fully aware of their limitations. Therefore, He keeps His bounty to them in this present life within the limits they can cope with. He keeps His unlimited bounty till later, and gives it only to those who pass the test of this life, reaching the life to come in safety. They will then receive His limitless bounty.

> *It is He who sends down rain when they have lost all hope, and spreads His grace far and wide. He is the Protector, worthy of all praise.* (Verse 28)

Again, we are reminded of some aspects of God's grace as He bestows it on people living on earth. We see them here when they have gone without rain for some time. They feel their powerlessness as water, life's

necessity, is denied them. They are in total despair. At this point, the skies open and God's grace is spread far and wide. The land is alive again, green shoots spring up, the seeds that have been planted promise a good yield, the weather moderates, smiles are back on people's faces and hope is regained. What separates the old despair from the new hope is no more than a few minutes during which the gates of God's grace are open and rain pours down: "*He is the Protector, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 28) His help is available at all times. He is not only worthy of praise in Himself but also for all His attributes.

The Arabic text uses the term *ghayth* to refer to rain. The term connotes providing emergency help for those who are in desperate need. The effects are given as God '*spreads His grace*', which enhances feelings of hope and happiness that we actually experience as we look at the emerging vegetation. Nothing has a greater comforting and calming effect on people than rain pouring down after a period of drought. Nothing helps to remove tension and worry better than seeing the land blooming after it has been barren and desolate.

What Causes Misfortune

> *Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and all the living creatures which He placed in them. He has the power to gather them all whenever He will. Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.* (Verses 29–31)

These verses refer to a universal sign that is there for all to see, endorsing the truth the revelation testifies to, even though they continue to doubt it. The sign they see in the heavens and the earth is very clear, admitting no doubt. It addresses human nature in the language it understands. No one seriously argues about it. It states the fact that neither man nor any other of God's creation was the originator of the heavens and the earth. Admitting that they have a Creator, therefore, is inescapable. The heavens and the earth are huge, yet they demonstrate a meticulous harmony and function endlessly according to consistent

laws. This cannot be logically explained except by acknowledging that they have been created by God who conducts their affairs. Human nature directly receives this logic imparted by the universe, understands and accepts it before it hears any word that may be said about it by any external source.

This universal sign incorporates another, for God did not only create the heavens and the earth. He also created "*all the living creatures which He placed in them.*" (Verse 29) Life on our planet alone is another sign, so how should we conceive of other types of life unknown to us existing elsewhere in the universe. Life on this planet is a secret no one has yet managed to fathom, let alone aspire to initiate. It is a secret engulfed with mystery. We do not know how or from where it comes; nor do we know how it entwines with other creatures. All attempts to identify its source or nature have failed to open these closed doors. All research is necessarily confined to the development of living creatures, after they have life, and their variety and functions. Even in this limited scope, there are conflicting views and theories. Behind the curtain, however, there remains the great secret that no mental understanding can explore. It belongs to God alone.

All living creatures, everywhere, on earth and within it, in the deep sea and at high altitude, not to think of the rest of creatures beyond our world, are largely unknown to us. Indeed man only knows about a small number of them. All these creatures that God has placed in the heavens and the earth can be gathered by God whenever He wills. Not a single one of them will go astray or absent itself.

People cannot gather together a flock of domestic birds should they flee their cages, or bees that escape their hive. Everywhere on earth there are collections of different types of birds, bees, ants, insects, bacteria, cattle, beasts, fish, sea mammals, as well as human communities. There are also in the heavens other creatures that may be greater in number and that live in habitats about which we know nothing. Yet God can gather all these together if He so pleases. The time it takes between their placement in their different habitats and their gathering together is no more than the uttering of one word. The verse, here, therefore, contrasts the placement of all these creatures everywhere in the universe with their gathering: it is all done in just a

moment. In true Qur'ānic style, these two great scenes are juxtaposed in one short verse that takes only a few seconds to read.

The *sūrah* then tells them of what happens to the unbelievers in this life, as a result of what they perpetrate. Yet God does not take them to task for all this; He overlooks a great many of their actions. It describes their powerlessness as they occupy only a small corner of the living world: "*Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.*" (Verses 30–31)

In the first of these two verses we see in action both God's justice and His grace as He bestows it on man. Every misfortune or calamity that befalls man is a direct result of what man does, but God does not hold him to account for all his deeds. He knows man's weakness and the desires inherent in his nature which often tempt and overpower him. Therefore, God pardons much of what man does. In the second verse we see man as he truly is: weak, powerless and without support. From whom, then, can he seek protection other than from the One who protects all?

Control of Natural Laws

> *And among His signs are the ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea. In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God; or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought and yet He forgives much. Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them.* (Verses 32–35)

Ships that traverse the sea are yet another of God's signs, just like mountains. It is a sign seen by all. They represent a phenomenon that is based on several factors each of which is a great sign put in place by God Almighty. Who created the sea? Can any human or any other creature claim that they made the sea? Who gave the sea its different characteristics: the density of its water, its depth and vast area allowing

it to carry such large craft? Then what about the wind that moves the ships that were known to those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān; and what about other forces that man was subsequently able to use such as steam and nuclear power, and other forces God may place at man's disposal in future? Who has given these forces their qualities that make them able to move such huge ships in the sea, so that they look like mountains on its surface?

"*If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea.*" (Verse 33) The wind may die down at times and ships will lie motionless, as though life has departed from them. "*In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God.*" (Verse 33) The signs are both in making the ships sail across the sea and in leaving them motionless. Such signs are appreciated by everyone who is patient in adversity, thankful for blessings. Patience and gratitude are often mentioned together in the Qur'ān, as they are interrelated qualities of believers in conditions of hardship and happiness.

"*Or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought.*" (Verse 34) He may cause the ships to be destroyed or drowned as a result of people's sins or deviation from the faith that all creatures acknowledge, with the exception of the unbelievers. "*And yet He forgives much.*" (Verse 34) He certainly does not punish people for every sinful action they do. Instead, He pardons and forgives much.

"*Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them.*" (Verse 35) Should God want to smite them, destroy their ships or visit them with some other punishment, they simply have no means of escape. Thus they are made to know that whatever they possess of this life's riches, comforts and pleasures can always be taken away from them. The only thing that is stable in this present life is to maintain a close relation with God.

A Community Moulded by Faith

The *sūrah* takes another step forward, alerting them to the fact that whatever they have in life on earth is transient. The only lasting value is what God grants in the life to come to those who have believed and

placed their trust in Him. Some of the distinctive qualities that make of true believers a separate community are then given:

> *Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord; who shun grave sins and gross indecencies; and who, when angered, will forgive; who respond to their Lord, attend regularly to their prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and give generously out of what We have provided for them; and who, when oppressed, defend themselves. An evil deed is requited by an evil like it, but the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God. He does not love wrongdoers. However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store. As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve.* (Verses 36–43)

Earlier in the *sūrah*, we had a description of the conditions pertaining to mankind. We learnt that those given revelations divided into groups: and such divisions were caused by petty rivalries rather than any lack of knowledge of the Divine book and the faith God established for mankind from the times of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them all). It also pointed out that the generations that followed those who were in dispute entertained serious doubts about Divine revelations. Needless to say, the conditions of those who did not receive revelations and had no messenger to guide them along the right path were even worse. Therefore, mankind needed wise leadership to save it from the depth of ignorance into which it had sunk and to guide its footsteps along the way that leads man to God, his Lord and the Lord of all the worlds. Therefore, God revealed this Qur'ān, in the Arabic tongue, to His servant Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), incorporating in it what He had enjoined upon Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Thus all phases of the Divine message, from early history, are linked together. The path it follows and the goals it aims to achieve

are the same. With this final message, the Muslim community comes into existence, assuming the leadership of mankind and setting a model of how the Divine faith functions in human life.

The present verses describe the distinctive qualities of this community that make it a community apart. Although these verses were revealed in Makkah, long before the establishment of the Muslim state in Madīnah, we note that one of these qualities is that its affairs are conducted on the basis of mutual consultation. This suggests that consultation is more deeply ingrained in the life of the Muslim community than its being the basis of its political system. It is, thus, an essential quality of the Muslim community. It then had to be carried further to the state, which is a natural progression from that of Muslim community. Another quality to be noted is that Muslims defend themselves when they come under oppression. Yet the order given to the Muslims in Makkah was that they should endure with patience and not retaliate. It was only after they migrated to Madīnah that a different order was given to them and permission to fight was granted: "*Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory.*" (22: 39) That this quality is mentioned in Makkan verses suggests that self defence against oppression is a permanent right of the Muslim community, while the instruction to remain patient and not to retaliate pertained to an exceptional and particular situation during the early period. The quality is mentioned here because an outline of the essential qualities of the Muslim community is given. Hence, this quality could not be overlooked, even though retaliation in self defence was not as then permitted.

The fact that these qualities are mentioned in this Makkan *sūrah*, long before the Muslim community had assumed practical leadership should be reflected upon. These qualities must be fulfilled by the Muslim community before it is fit to assume practical leadership. What are these qualities, and what value do they have in human life as a whole?

These qualities are: faith, placing our trust in God alone, refraining completely from grave sin and indecency, forgiving when angry, responding to God, attending regularly to prayer, conducting our affairs

through proper consultation, giving generously in charity, resisting oppression, forgiving other people, putting things right and remaining patient in adversity. We need to reflect a little on each of these qualities in the order they occur in the *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* sets before us the Divine standard of values, showing us which of these are transitory and which are enduring and inalterable. Muslims will, thus, have a clear vision, one free of confusion. This standard is outlined first as a prelude to the qualities of the Muslim community: "*Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring.*" (Verse 36)

There are plenty of attractive and pleasant things in the life of this world: offspring, wealth, desires and their fulfilment, high social standing, power, as well as other things to enjoy. These are granted by God as part of His bounty that is unattached to people's behaviour in this life, but He adds blessing to those who are obedient to Him, even though their share is little, and denies such blessing to sinners even though their share is great indeed. Yet none of this is permanent or enduring. It is all short-lived; it neither raises nor lowers anyone's standing. Nothing of it reflects anyone's position with God, or provides an indication of His pleasure or displeasure with anyone. It is all a fleeting enjoyment. "*That which is with God is much better and more enduring.*" (Verse 36) It is better in essence and longer lasting. Compared to what is with God, all life enjoyments are trifling and short-lived. Its maximum duration is the life of the individual or the life of humanity. Both are no more than a fleeting moment in God's measure.

Having established this true fact, the *sūrah* outlines the qualities of the believers who are destined to enjoy the enduring blessings God has in store for them. The first of these qualities is faith: "*That which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord.*" (Verse 36) To believe is to recognize the first and basic truth without which man cannot know for certain anything in the universe. It is through believing in God that we begin to understand that the universe is created by Him. This is essential so that we know how to deal with the universe and learn about the laws that operate in it. We can then bring our lives into

harmony with the universe, so as not to deviate from its laws. Such harmony will impart ease and comfort in our lives. We will then move, together with the universe, in a way that submits to God and seeks His acceptance. This quality is necessary for every human being, but it is most essential for the Muslim community that seeks to lead humanity.

Faith also imparts reassurance and confidence, and dispels doubt, worry, fear and despair. These are necessary throughout our life journey, but they are all the more essential for the leader who charts the way ahead.

What faith gives to man is to free him from the pressures of personal desire, interest and gain. With faith, man's heart looks up to a goal that lies beyond his own soul. He realizes that he has no say in the course the Divine message takes; it is, after all, a message from God, while he is simply a worker employed by God. This realization is extremely important to the person who is in a position of leadership so that he does not allow despair to creep in should people turn away from him or should he suffer persecution. This realization also acts as a safeguard so that he does not become arrogant should he gain power. In every situation, he remains no more than a worker.

The first crop of Muslims accepted the faith in a way that remarkably influenced their mentality, morality and behaviour. Prior to Islam, the meaning of faith had been greatly weakened so that it no longer influenced people's morality and behaviour. Islam brought about a new model of faith, one that was alive and influential, enabling that community of believers to assume the task of leadership entrusted to it. Syed Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī writes about the effects of this character-moulding faith:

> Once the Gordian knot of disbelief had been cut, it was easy to unfasten the other knots that bound them. And once the Prophet had opened their hearts to Islam, he did not have to struggle at each step to make them reject Wrong and accept Right. They entered into the new faith with heart and soul and submitted themselves without demur to what the Prophet decreed…

> Thus, when they had attained to the highest pinnacle of moral development and become proof against the inducements of Satan and of their own baser self, when they had learned to prefer the future good to the immediate good and had been transformed into lovers of the Hereafter even while living in this world, when neither poverty could be a barrier in their path nor could riches make them vain, when they had become meek, yet unbending before power, and when they had come to be the dispensers of justice among men even though it might go against themselves, their own kith and kin, God made the whole world subservient to them and appointed them the Defenders of the Faith.[3]

He also elaborates on the effect of faith on people's morality:

> During the pre-Islamic era people generally worshipped inanimate objects which could neither help nor grant their petitions and had, in fact, been created merely to serve their needs. Hence, there was no real moral enthusiasm, no genuine spirituality in their religions. The God of their conception was an artisan who had retired into a corner after finishing His job. They believed that He had bequeathed His kingdom to those whom He had adorned with the mantle of Divinity and now it was they who controlled the affairs of the universe. They lacked any spiritual understanding of God. They did not know of Him as the Creator of the universe, and any awareness was akin to the knowledge of an historian who, when he is asked who constructed a certain building, replies that it was built by such and such a king, but the mention of the king's name neither inspires awe in his heart, nor makes any solemn impression on his mind. They had no intimate consciousness of the Divine attributes and, consequently, their hearts did not bear the imprint of God's glory and love...

3. Nadwī, Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī, *Islam and the World*, Leicester, 2005, pp. 41–42.

– Originally written in Arabic, this book has been heavily edited in its English version. I chose to include all quotations from it as they appear in its English version rather than provide a new translation that is more faithful to the original text. – Editor's note.

The Muslims in general and the Arabs in particular rejected this vague and sickly religiousness and attained a Faith which was at once intense and profound and which permeated through every fibre of their existence. They pledged their Faith in God Who has Excellent Attributes, Who is the Most Exalted, the Most Magnificent and the Master of the Day of Judgement. Says the Holy Qur'ān: "*God is He besides Whom there is no other god; The Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace [and Perfection], the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme; Glory to God [High is He] above the partners they attribute to Him. He is the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms and Colours. To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names; Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, doth declare His Praises and Glory: and He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise.*" (59: 23–24)

He is the God Who is the Creator and the Preserver of the universe, Who rewards with paradise and chastises with hell, Who swells or shrinks the subsistence of whomsoever He likes, Who is the Knower of all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and Who knows the stealth of the eyes and the secrets of the hearts, and is the embodiment of beauty and sublimity, strength and splendour, perfection and beneficence.

This solemn conviction produced a miraculous transformation among the early followers of Islam. Whoever affirmed his faith in the One Transcendent God and testified to '*Lā ilāha illallāh*'[4] experienced a sudden change in himself. The innermost recesses of his soul were lit up with the sublime radiance of God-consciousness, the spirit and the flesh in him ceased to be the enemies of one another; he achieved equilibrium within himself and extraordinary feats of courage, endurance and faith were performed by the believer.

This faith was a wonderful source of moral training. It generated among its followers an amazing strength of will, self-criticism

4. This phrase means, 'there is no deity other than God'. It is the first half of the declaration anyone who wishes to be a Muslim must make. The other half is, 'Muḥammad is God's messenger.' – Editor's note.

and justice, as nothing can help overcome the inducements of the self so successfully as living faith in the Omnipresence of God.

If anyone succumbed to evil or negative urges and fell into error, even unobserved, he would immediately confess to the Prophet and undergo the severest punishment willingly to save himself from Divine displeasure.[5]

Virtues such as honesty and trustworthiness developed in the early Muslims as the natural fruits of a sense of living belief in the Omnipresence of the Absolute God. Even when alone and unnoticed, or in any other situation wherein they could easily transgress the bounds of religious conduct, fear of God kept the Muslims under rigid control.[6]

The unruly Arabs, who were so lawless in their ways, surrendered themselves so absolutely to the guidance of the Faith that it was impossible for them to infringe the Divine law. They accepted the Sovereignty of God in its fullest sense. In peace and in war, in joy and in sorrow, in every relationship of life, at each turn of affairs and in the minutest details of their concerns they looked to His guidance and help and carried out His commands without the slightest demur.[7]

Qualities of the Faithful

Such is the effect of true belief in God to which the *sūrah* refers. To place one's complete trust in God is something such a belief entails, but the Qur'ān gives prominence to this quality: "*[It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord.*" (Verse 36) In the Arabic text, the inversion mode is used so as to make the sentence read, 'in their Lord they place their trust.' This implies that they do not place their trust in anyone other than God. This is indeed the first practical manifestation of believing in God's oneness. A believer knows God's attributes, believes in them all and is certain that no one does

5. Nadwī, ibid., pp. 42–44.
6. Ibid., p. 46.
7. Ibid., pp. 49–50.

anything unless He wills and nothing occurs without His sanction. Hence, his trust in God is complete. Everything he does or refrains from doing is aimed at winning His pleasure. Such a feeling is necessary for everyone. It enables man to stand with his head raised high, feeling inner certainty, reassured, fearing no one, able to withstand adversity, full of contentment in times of ease. Yet this feeling is far more necessary to a leader who is eager to fulfil his responsibilities.

"*Who shun grave sins and gross indecencies.*" (Verse 37) Purity of heart which ensures that behaviour is free of grave sin and indecency is a product of sound faith. It is also a necessary requirement for wise leadership. No one can maintain purity of heart and then indulge in grave sins and gross indecencies. A heart that lacks purity is totally unsuitable for leadership: its guiding light is obliterated by sin. Faith heightened the sensitivity of the first generation of Muslims enabling them to attain the standards described by Nadwi. It qualified them to provide a leadership of unprecedented and unequalled qualities. They remain the model to be emulated by later generations.

God is fully aware of man's weaknesses. Therefore, He has set the mark that qualifies people for the position of leadership at shunning grave sins and gross indecencies, not ordinary ones. His grace ensures that minor sins will be overlooked. This is an act of grace that He bestows on us which should arouse our feeling of humility before Him.

"*And who, when angered, will forgive.*" (Verse 37) This quality, mentioned immediately after the implicit reference to God's forgiveness of man's errors and sins, encourages an attitude of mutual forbearance and forgiveness between people. It highlights a characteristic of believers which makes them forgive when something angers them. Again we see the Islamic approach to human weakness. It does not require man to do anything beyond what he is capable of. God knows that anger is a natural human reaction and that it is not always bad. Feeling angry at something committed against God, faith, truth or justice is commendable and can bring about good results. Therefore, Islam does not forbid anger or consider it a sin. It recognizes it as a natural feeling, thus preventing conflict between man's religion and nature. However, it takes man by the hand to help him overcome his anger, encouraging him to pardon and forbear. It further makes such forgiveness one of

the important qualities of believers. It is well established that the Prophet was never angry at anything related to his own person. His anger, when it occurred, was only for God's sake and was overpowering. Yet such a high standard was set by Muḥammad (peace be upon him) who attained a high standard of greatness. Hence, God does not make this a standard that believers should attain to, but rather sets it as an ideal to strive for. What they are required to do is to forbear and forgive when angry, rising above the desire to retaliate, as long as this remains within the personal sphere.

"*Who respond to their Lord.*" (Verse 38) They remove all impediments that prevent such response. These impediments are within the human soul, created by one's desires, aspirations and ambitions. When all these impediments are removed, man finds the way to God smooth and wide open. His response is then free of any restraint or impediment.

The type of response is then shown in detail. The first aspect is that believers "*attend regularly to their prayer.*" (Verse 38) Prayer is given great importance in Islam. It comes second only to the first rule of faith, which is the declaration of one's belief in God's oneness and in Muḥammad as God's messenger. Prayer provides the bond between man and his Lord, and gives a practical example of human equality, with worshippers standing shoulder to shoulder in rows, with no distinction whatsoever between them.

Perhaps this is the reason why prayer is immediately followed, in this instance, by the quality of consultation within the Muslim community, giving it precedence over the payment of *zakāt* which is normally mentioned together with prayer. Thus, believers "*conduct their affairs by mutual consultation.*" (Verse 38) As it is phrased, the statement makes consultation a characteristic that pervades every aspect of their lives. As we have already said, this is a Makkan statement made long before the establishment of the Islamic state. This means that this quality is characteristic of the Muslim community in all situations, even though no state or government had as then been established. In fact, the state is only a natural by-product of the Muslim community and its intrinsic qualities. The Muslim community incorporates the state and together they ensure the implementation of the Islamic code of life both at individual and society levels.

For this reason, consultation was an early quality of the Muslim community and applied to a far greater area than the political arena. It is an essential aspect of Islamic life and a distinctive quality of the community entrusted with the role of leading mankind. Needless to say, it is a fundamental quality of sound leadership.

The way to conduct consultation is left for every generation and environment to decide. It is not cast in a rigid form that must always be followed. No Islamic system is outlined in a text that must be literally followed or set in a particular model that cannot be modified. They are first and foremost a product of a process that begins with the truth of faith taking root in man's heart so as to mould his thought and behaviour. Discussion about the details of an Islamic system while giving little attention to the truth of faith that gives rise to them is a futile exercise. What we are saying here may appear to anyone who is unaware of the truth of Islamic faith a theoretical discourse without firm basis. To suppose so is certainly wrong. A careful examination of its pure concepts of belief will show that Islam contains psychological and intellectual facts that have a profound effect on man, preparing the way to the rise of certain systems and situations in human society. The Qur'ānic and *Ḥadīth* texts then indicate the form that such systems and situations should take. Thus, the texts do not initiate the systems, but merely organize them. For any Islamic system to be established and functioning, it is necessary that a Muslim community should be in existence in which faith is actively working. Otherwise, no form is good enough to produce a system that can be described as Islamic. When a Muslim community is truly in existence, where people feel the truth of faith deep in their hearts, the Islamic system will naturally develop, taking a shape and form that suits that particular community, its environment and circumstances, working within the framework of the basic Islamic principles and effectively implementing them.

"*And give generously out of what We have provided for them.*" (Verse 38) This is again a requirement that preceded the determination of the different rates of *zakāt*, according to the type of property held. These rates were set in the second year after the Prophet migrated to Madīnah where he established the first Islamic state. However, the idea of allocating a portion of what God has given us to be spent in what

serves the Islamic cause came in the early stages of the life of the Muslim community. It goes back to the early days of its inception.

For Islam to be properly advocated it is necessary that Muslims should be ready to allocate money for its cause. This purges their hearts of greed and helps them rise above the instinctive desire to own. It demonstrates their reliance on God and what He has for them. All these are necessary for faith to be complete and firmly rooted. Moreover, it is necessary for the Muslim society. To advocate Islam is to be committed to strive for its cause. It is imperative that the community should demonstrate complete solidarity in such striving, whatever the outcome. At times, such solidarity needs to be complete, leaving no one any property that is considered his own. An example of this took place in the early days of Islam, when the Makkan Muslims migrated to Madīnah where they were given warm hospitality. When their situation became less acute, a permanent *zakāt* system was put in place. Be that as it may, the very concept of spending for the cause is an essential quality of the Muslim community.

"*And who, when oppressed, defend themselves.*" (Verse 39) As we stated earlier, that this quality is mentioned in a Makkan *sūrah* is significant. It means that rising against oppression and injustice is in the very nature of a community that is moulded to be the best among human communities. It enjoins what is right and fair, forbids what is wrong, and ensures that right and justice are implemented in human life. It is an honourable community that derives its honour from God: "*All honour belongs to God, and to His messenger and those who believe [in God].*" (63: 8)

In the early history of Islam, there was a period, when the Muslim community was still in Makkah, during which the Muslims were ordered not to fight, but to concentrate on attending to prayer and paying *zakāt*. This, however, was due to certain local reasons and to achieve a particular disciplinary objective that was especially relevant to the first Muslim Arab community. It should be emphasized that this was a temporary measure that does not contradict the essential qualities of the Muslim community.

There were, indeed, particular reasons behind this choice of a peaceful and patient approach during the Makkan period. One was that the

persecution the Muslims suffered at the time was not because of any recognisable authority holding sway in Arabian society. Instead, the tribal structure then pertaining made it rather loose politically and socially. Hence, a Muslim who belonged to a family of distinction could come to harm only at the hands of other members of his own family. No one else dared take any measure against him. A collective assault on a Muslim individual or on Muslims generally was a rare event. In addition, masters could torture or otherwise pain their slaves and weaker tribal elements if they chose to adopt Islam. Over time many of these were bought and set free by Muslims, and thus largely became immune to persecution. Furthermore, the Prophet did not wish to see a battle flaring up in every home between a Muslim and his family who had not as yet accepted Islam. It was, thus, a question of trying to soften hearts rather than harden them.

Another reason behind this peaceful approach was that the social environment encouraged support to anyone who was unjustly wronged or physically harmed. By being patient in adversity and holding to their faith despite persecution, Muslims could benefit by such support. This is what actually happened when the Hashimite clan, to which the Prophet belonged, were subjected to a social and economic boycott. The natural Arabian sense of justice rebelled against this wrongful boycott, enforcing its abrogation, despite the fact that it was originally solemnized by a written agreement which was then hung inside the Ka'bah.

Yet another reason was that resort to force and the use of arms was a characteristic of the Arabian social environment. People were always on edge, with little to enforce discipline. To ensure proper balance in the Muslim personality, this tendency needed to be restrained. People needed to rein in their feelings by setting themselves definite goals. It was also necessary that they should get used to being patient, despite adversity, and that they could control themselves and their actions. It was also necessary to make them feel that their every whim, desire and gain were secondary to their faith. Therefore, the requirement that they should remain patient in such adversity was consistent with the system that sought to educate them and bring about proper balance in their Islamic character.

It was for these and similar reasons that a policy of peaceful coexistence and perseverance was followed during the Makkan period, while the permanent nature of the Muslim community based on self defence when oppressed was also clearly stated: "*And who, when oppressed, defend themselves.*" (Verse 39) This rule is further confirmed as a permanent aspect of human life: "*An evil deed is requited by an evil like it.*" (Verse 40) Thus, justice requires that an evil act should be answered with an act of similar nature. Otherwise, evil would be left to triumph and expand; there would be no force to check it.

Forgiveness is encouraged so that believers seek reward from God and at the same time purge themselves of the desire to retaliate; this also ensures that society does not harbour grudges: "*But the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God.*" (Verse 40) This is indeed an exception from the rule. It should be borne in mind that forgiveness can only be exercised by one who is able to requite evil with its like. It is only in such a case that forgiveness brings its desired results in both the perpetrator and the person who is wronged. When the perpetrator realizes that he has been pardoned out of the goodness of the other person, and not because of any weakness or inability to retaliate, he feels ashamed and appreciates that his opponent has scored a moral victory. Similarly, a strong person who forgives feels that he has the higher moral ground. Thus, forgiveness is better for both parties. This, however, does not apply in the case of weakness and inability to retaliate. Indeed, forgiveness does not exist in such a situation; it only encourages the aggressor and brings further humiliation to those wronged.

"*He does not love wrongdoers.*" (Verse 40) This statement reconfirms the rule that an evil act is requited by a similar one. It also implies that one should not exceed the wrong done when repelling evil.

We then have another confirmation, which is more detailed: "*However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store.*" (Verses 41–42) A wronged person who retaliates against injustice, repays an evil act with its like, and who makes sure not to transgress his limits, is simply exercising his legitimate right. Hence, no blame attaches to him. No one should prevent him from exacting

justice. The ones to be stopped are those who oppress and encroach on others. Human life cannot be set on a right basis while injustice continues unchecked and its perpetrators go about freely, fearing no consequence. God warns all perpetrators of injustice that they will be severely punished, but people must also rise against those responsible and prevent them from committing further injustice.

The *sūrah* again refers to the need for self restraint, patience in adversity and forgiveness in personal cases, when such forgiveness is exercised as an act of magnanimity taken from a position of strength and ability to retaliate: "*As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve.*" (Verse 43)

When we take these verses and similar texts together, we clearly see how they ensure balance between the two directions. They want a Muslim to be free of grudge, anger, weakness, servility, as also of injustice and oppression. A Muslim should always seek God's pleasure, aware that patience is his mainstay as he continues his life journey.

Together, these qualities which believers should have impart a distinctive character to the Muslim community, the community that is assigned the task of leading mankind.

What Price for a Second Chance?

Having outlined the qualities of believers who have ample and more lasting reward from God, the *sūrah* paints the opposite picture of those who go astray and inflict injustice. They will inevitably suffer humiliation:

> *He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him. When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance. The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward.* (Verses 44–46)

What God wills is certain to take place. No one can change a course God has determined. Hence, "*He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him.*" (Verse 44) When God knows, on the basis of a person's true attitude and actions that he deserves to be left astray, His word that this person be left to follow his own devices will be done. He will then have no one to save him from error or its ultimate results, or to assist in its retraction: "*When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance.*" (Verses 44–45)

In this present world, the wrongdoers are normally arrogant, despotic and transgressors. Hence, their highlighted aspect on the Day of Judgement is that of humiliation. They see the suffering awaiting them and their pride crumbles. Subdued, they will meekly ask: "*Is there any way of return?*" It is a question that combines eagerness and despair of any chance to save themselves. They are made to see the fire and they look at it in disgrace and utter humiliation. They cannot lift their eyes; therefore, they cast only a furtive glance.

It will be clear then that the believers are the ones who state the truth: "*The believers will then say: The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.*" (Verse 45) They are the ones who have lost everything, standing there humbly asking for a second chance that will not be given. The final comment on this image explains the outcome for those brought before the fire: "*Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward.*" (Verses 45–46) No support will be forthcoming as the final word has been said and all ways are sealed.

When Response is Slow Coming

Now the *sūrah* addresses those who stubbornly opposed the Prophet's message with an order to respond to their Lord before such a fate comes upon them, all of a sudden, when they will be without support. A directive to the Prophet is added instructing him to turn away from

them if they persist in their rejection. His task though is only to deliver his message; he is not responsible for anyone:

> *Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins. If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you]. When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude.* (Verses 47–48)

Having made the warning and the directive abundantly clear, these verses portray the nature of the one who opposes the Divine message and stubbornly refuses to submit to its truth. He is fickle, wildly rejoicing when he is granted something of God's grace and panicking in the face of adversity. In such a situation, man often transgresses all bounds and shows no gratitude for what he is given: "*When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude.*" (Verse 48)

By way of comment on this, the *sūrah* makes absolutely clear that whatever happiness or misfortune, affluence or scarcity befalls man is determined by God. It is very strange therefore for someone, who reacts in this way to blessings and misfortune, to turn away from God when He holds all the strings affecting his life:

> *To God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. He creates what He will. He grants female offspring to whomever He will, and male to whomever He will; or gives both male and female to whomever He will, and causes whomever He will to be barren. He is All-Knowing, infinite in His power.* (Verses 49–50)

Offspring is an aspect of what man is given or denied. It is something very dear to man. Since human nature is very sensitive to procreation, looking at it from this angle is more effective. The *sūrah* spoke earlier of man's provisions and how they are given in plentiful or scant measure.

Offspring is a different aspect of what God provides man with. It is no different from money, however, in the way it is granted.

These verses begin by stating that everything in the heavens and earth belongs to God alone. This introduction fits with every detail that follows this statement of general ownership. The same is true of the succeeding sentence: "*He creates what He will.*" (Verse 49) This emphasizes the effect the verse aims to generate, directing man, who loves every good thing, to turn to God who creates everything that man loves and dislikes.

Further details are given of what God may grant or withhold. He may grant female offspring to anyone. The Arabs addressed for the first time by the Qur'ān used to dislike females. He also grants male children to anyone He chooses. Alternatively, He may give offspring of both kinds to anyone. The fourth situation is that He may deny offspring altogether, making people barren. What is important to remember is that all these situations are determined by God's will. None interferes in His decision which is based on His perfect knowledge and executed by His power: "*He is All-Knowing, infinite in His power.*" (Verse 50)

Methods of Revelation

As it draws to its conclusion, the *sūrah* picks up its main theme again, which is the truth of revelation and message. It now speaks of the nature of this contact between God and His chosen servants and how it is done. It asserts that such contact has actually taken place with the last messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). This last contact has a definite objective God wishes to accomplish, namely, providing guidance along a straight path to whoever chooses to be guided:

> *It is not granted to any human being that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will. He is exalted, wise. Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a*

light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return. (Verses 51–53)

The first of these verses makes it abundantly clear that no man is ever spoken to by God face to face. 'Ā'ishah is quoted as saying: "Whoever claims that Muḥammad has seen his Lord is delivering a very grave falsehood." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] God speaks to people in one of three ways. First, by 'revelation', which is given directly and the recipient knows that it comes from God. Secondly, 'from behind a veil', as God spoke to Moses whose request to see God was denied. In fact, he was unable to stand firm when God's glory was revealed to the mountain. The relevant Qur'ānic report states: "*When Moses came for Our appointment and his Lord spoke to him, he said: 'My Lord, show Yourself to me, so that I may look at You.' Said [God]: 'You shall not see Me. But look upon the mountain; if it remains firm in its place, then, only then, you shall see Me.' When his Lord revealed His glory to the mountain, He sent it crashing down. Moses fell down senseless. When he came to himself, he said: 'Limitless You are in Your glory. To You I turn in repentance. I am the first to truly believe in You.*'" (7: 143)

The third form of address is that God sends a messenger, who is an angel, '*to reveal by His command what He will.*' This takes different forms, which the Prophet explained as follows:

1. The angel would impart to him something he recognized within himself, without seeing the angel. The Prophet said: 'The Holy Spirit has imparted to me that no soul will ever die until it has had whatever provisions assigned to it. Therefore, remain God-fearing and moderate your requests.'
2. The angel would come to the Prophet in the form of a man who spoke to him and made sure that he understood what was being said to him.
3. The angel would give him the revelation in a way that sounded like a bell ringing in his ear. This was the hardest form for the

Prophet. He would be perspiring even on a very cold day. If he was riding a camel, his camel would fall to the ground. Once he received revelation in this way when he was seated, with his thigh next to that of Zayd ibn Thābit who felt then that his bone was almost broken.

4. The Prophet would see the angel in the angel's own form, giving him whatever God bid him give. This happened to him twice as mentioned in verses 7 and 13 of *Sūrah* 53, The Star.[8]

Such were the different forms of contact and revelation. "*He is Exalted, Wise.*" (Verse 51) He bestows His revelation from on high, to whomever He chooses, according to His wisdom.

The Nature of Revelation

At this point I have to say that whenever I read a Qur'ānic verse or a statement by the Prophet that mentions revelation, I feel a shudder as I try to think how it happened. How does such contact take place between the One who is eternal, having no defined space in time or place, who encompasses everything and has nothing that bears any resemblance to Him, and an ordinary mortal? And how is such contact then represented in words, sentences and meanings? How can a mortal receive God's eternal word which is totally unlike what we know? How this, and how that? I then say to myself: why should I ask when I cannot imagine things beyond my limited space within the world of mortals? The truth is that this took place and was given a form which I can now recognize within my immediate world.

Yet the shudder remains. Prophethood is something great indeed. Similarly, the moment when an ordinary man receives revelation from on high is indeed very great. My reader, can you feel it with me? Are you, like me, trying to imagine it; imagine this revelation coming from 'there'? Am I saying, there? No! there is no such thing as 'there'. Revelation comes from no place, time, space, direction or situation. It

8. Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma'ād*, Beirut, 1994, Vol. 1, pp. 78–80.

comes from the Absolute, the Infinite, the Eternal, from God Almighty. It is addressed to a mortal: it is true that the recipient is a Prophet and a messenger, but he remains confined to the limited world of mortals. It is such a wonderful and miraculous contact which can only be made a reality by God who alone knows how it becomes reality. My reader, do you appreciate the feelings I am trying to portray in such disjointed sentences? Indeed, I do not know what I am saying about what I experience in the depths of my heart as I try to contemplate this great event, which is miraculous in both nature and form. It took place on numerous occasions during the lifetime of God's messenger. Several people saw some aspects of it with their own eyes.

'Ā'ishah witnessed some of these remarkable moments in the history of mankind. She says about one of them: "The Prophet said to me, ''Ā'ishah! Here is Gabriel presenting his greeting to you.' I said, 'Peace be to him, together with God's mercy.' The Prophet was seeing what we could not see." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] Zayd ibn Thābit also witnessed such a great moment as stated earlier. Other companions of the Prophet saw it on many occasions, recognizing the fact as they looked at the Prophet. They left him alone to receive whatever he received. When it was over, he was with them just as he was before.

Then, what sort of special nature distinguishes the human soul that makes this contact with the sublime? What is the element within the human soul that enables it to be the recipient of revelation from on high? This is yet another issue. In what way did the Prophet's soul, which is a human soul, feel this contact and how did it open its receptive faculties to revelation? How did it feel the universe in those moments when God opened His glory to it, with His words resounding in its every corner?

What care, what grace, what honour are bestowed on man, such a small creature, when God in His glory confers on him what enlightens his way ahead and keeps him on the right track? Such honour appears great indeed when we remember that, compared to God's kingdom, man looks more insignificant than a mosquito compared to man.

Revelation is indeed a reality, but a sublime one. It appears to rise to a high and distant horizon which our faculties can hardly perceive.

The Guiding Light

> *Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return.* (Verses 52–53)

It was by means of such contact that revelation was given to the Prophet: "*Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command.*" (Verse 52) The process was the same as revelation granted to earlier messengers, bringing to the Prophet a '*spirit*' that gives life to souls, motivating them to act and implement the Divine message. "*You knew neither revelation nor faith.*" (Verse 52) The Qur'ān describes the Prophet's soul prior to revelation in this way. The Prophet had heard of revelation and faith before, because the Arabs were aware of other communities that had scriptures and believed in a well-defined faith. It is not the mere knowledge of such matters that this statement refers to. The reference here is to how revelation affected the Prophet's heart and conscience and how he interacted with it. He certainly experienced nothing of this before this spirit was revealed to him by God's command.

"*But We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants.*" (Verse 52) This is the total nature of the message given through this revelation. It is a light that imparts happiness to those hearts that are guided by it. "*You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God.*" (Verses 52–53) Special emphasis is placed here on relating guidance to God's will, making it clear that He alone grants it only to whom He will on the basis of His own knowledge, shared with no one else. The Prophet is only the means chosen to fulfil God's will. He does not initiate guidance in people's hearts. He only delivers God's message which opens the way to the fulfilment of God's will.

"*You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth.*" (Verses 52–53) Guidance shows us the path of God, at which point all ways converge, because it leads to the Sovereign who alone has dominion over the

heavens and the earth. Whoever is guided to His path is certain to know the laws that God has set in operation in the universe, bringing their forces into play and providing sustenance to all. Hence, the whole universe turns to its Supreme Owner to whom all shall return: "*Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return.*" (Verse 53) He will then judge them all. Such is the light God has given so that people will go along the way He has chosen for them; they will return to Him having obeyed His command and benefited by His guidance.

Thus the *sūrah* is brought to its conclusion. It began with a discussion of revelation, which provided its main theme. It stated that revelation started with the early prophets, making it clear that Divine religion is one, outlining the same code and showing the same way. It gives humanity its new leadership represented by the person of Muḥammad (peace be upon him), and in the community that believes in his message. This community is entrusted with the task of guiding people to the straight path leading to God. The *sūrah* also outlines the characteristics of this community which qualify it to provide sound leadership. It is this community that shoulders the trust bestowed from on high by the sublime process of revelation.